

## Communicating in Spite of TLAs (three-letter acronyms)

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*The unchecked use of acronyms and initialisms in technical writing presents a huge obstacle to clarity and readability. Although technical communicators are certainly more aware of this problem than are the engineers, scientists, and managers with whom they work, they need concrete guidelines and at least a small degree of self-righteousness on this subject to help them cope with the onslaught. That acronyms frustrate communication is well-founded in linguistic theory, not to mention common sense. Suggestions for mitigating their destructiveness include issues of audience, term selectivity, frequency and occasion of use, and aesthetics.*

### WHY WE DO IT

Our technologically and socially complex culture demands that we create new words and phrases almost daily to describe our products, our organizations, our environment. The problem is that we also have to learn almost daily the new vocabulary others have created. Through motives such as—

- a sometimes over-zealous attempt to invent new entities where none existed before, and by their names make them seem more concrete than they actually are;
- a (perhaps unconscious) wish to impress (or intimidate) others with knowledge of some sort of elitist jargon;
- a misguided attempt to be concise—

we find ourselves steering through a murky fog of acronyms and initialisms (hereinafter lumped together as “acronym”), wasting time and energy attempting to keep track of their meanings just so we can follow the general thread of both spoken and written communication.

### WHY IT'S A PROBLEM

Learning new words or combinations of words that are based on our previous knowledge of the language is one thing. But when those words are pushed to a further level of abstraction that leaves behind intrinsic semantic meaning, we are bound to flounder in our communication. Furthermore, there are no rules at work in the creation of “words” at this new level of language—a situation that hardly ever exists in natural human language.

It is the author's position that the over-abundant use of acronyms in technical, business, and even some popular writing is the single largest impediment to clear communication and readability. Unless they are extremely familiar, acronyms, even when defined initially in a document or article, slow us down and frustrate us in our attempt to understand even the main points in the communication. Because of its intrinsic lack of semantic content, a new acronym must be encountered many times before it is likely to become a comfortable part of an individual's vocabulary.

### WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

With these points made, and perhaps with some reinforcement from participants, this workshop presents some concrete guidelines for using (and not using) acronyms in technical writing. For example

- Assess the breadth of the audience in deciding which and how many acronyms to use.
- Restrict use of acronyms to only those terms repeated many times in the document, in other words,

to **terms** that represent the primary subject matter.

- Consider the context of the document; that is, will it become just part of a larger document? Will it be combined with documents or articles on a variety of topics?
- For those few acronyms deemed necessary, offer reminders occasionally of their translations throughout the document
- Do not use undefined acronyms on figure captions or call-outs. Do not use acronyms in titles and headings.
- Include a glossary. Consider giving not just acronym translations, but brief descriptions of the terms.
- Do not use acronyms as verbs.
- Do not use an acronym if the acronym itself has more syllables than the full term (for example WBS for wide-band switch).

Suggestions are also offered on the actual coining of acronyms. Descriptive terms are sometimes tailored for the sole purpose of creating a too-cute acronym. Other times, a new term inadvertently makes an embarrassing or misleading acronym

Workshop participants are given an opportunity to apply some of the offered suggestions on sample paragraphs. They also receive a fun, yet challenging, cross-word puzzle whose solutions are acronyms in the common culture and a booklet by the workshop leader called *Guidelines for Creating and Using Abbreviations and Acronyms*.

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An STC member for 13 years, this is Ms. Miller's first presentation at an annual conference. She has a B.A. in English and writes software user manuals for JPL's (oops!) Multimission Ground Data System.